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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Wounded TFG Soldiers Tell Their Stories

REF: NAIROBI 1339

¶1. Summary: On July 13 we met with Transitional Federal Government (TFG) soldiers wounded in the ongoing hostilities in Somalia. The soldiers were recovering from shrapnel and bullet wounds, and burns received in Mogadishu battles with al-Shabaab and in the June 18 Beledweyne suicide bombing that killed Security Minister Omar Hashi.

We found them in good spirits, and receiving adequate care from Nairobi West Hospital staff. We had lengthy conversations with two soldiers in particular, Mohamed and Musa. Their stories follow in para 3. End Summary.

¶2. Somalis associated with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) who have been injured in the ongoing hostilities have been medically evacuated to Nairobi West Hospital for treatment. Ambassador Ranneberger visited with some elders and troops on June 25 to publicly offer his support (reftel). We recently returned to the hospital for a more private visit with the soldiers to hear their experiences. The following are Mohamed's and Musa's stories.

Yahya

¶3. Yahya, who appeared to be 22-25 years old, is a Hawiye/Hawadle from Hiran region who cheerfully and openly described his experiences. He joined the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) around May 2008 in order to fight the Ethiopians, he said. After joining he spent about six months at a training camp near El-Baraf, in the Middle Shabelle region. He told us he was trained by former soldiers from Siad Barre's army. He received instruction on many types of weapons, he said, from truck-mounted heavy guns, to the RPG-7 and various rifles. With his unit, he practiced hit-and-run tactics in different terrains, and even received instruction in basic first aid. While most recruits were trained as infantryman, Yahya and certain others also received specialized training in VIP protection. After his training, Yahya was made a bodyguard for then-Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) military commander Omar Hashi (Note: Yahya was probably chosen for his regional and clan links to Hashi. End Note). Neither Yahya nor his ICU comrades received a salary while with the ICU. Lacking other opportunities, Yahya accepted that he would be only fed and housed, and provided with clothes and toiletries when he needed them.

¶4. After the TFG and ARS united in February 2009, Mohammed was issued a military uniform and assigned to Villa Somalia, the presidential palace, where with 11 other men, he helped protect now-Security Minister Hashi while Hashi was in Mogadishu. Yahya was fed and housed at Villa Somalia, and rode around the city in Hashi's large motorcades. Hashi changed cars within the convoy after every stop for meetings to improve his odds against IEDs and suicide car bombers, Yahya said. When Hashi was away, they stood guard at Villa

Somalia day and night, working in shifts. Mohammed told us that civilians around Villa Somalia helped the government troops by informing on al-Shabaab's activities in the area. Knowing al-Shabaab's capabilities, he said he believes Villa Somalia is well defended and safe from capture.

¶5. When it became clear Hashi would return from his June 2009 trip to Addis Ababa through Beledweyne, Yahya was ordered to travel to the Hiran region to help with security. Yahya said he dressed in civilian clothes, left his government-issued weapon in his barracks, and used public transport from Mogadishu to Beledweyne. There were no checkpoints along the road to Beledweyne, and no one knew his mission. In Beledweyne, he collected his personally-owned weapon from a family member, and joined Hashi when he arrived. On June 18 Yahya had just mounted his vehicle in Hashi's motorcade when the suicide bomber rammed Hashi's car. Yahya's upper body was sprayed with shrapnel. He was burned, sustained deep cuts to his face, and is now blind in one eye. As a TFG soldier, Yahya said his salary is \$130 dollars a month, of which \$30 is intended to be pooled with others in his unit for food. He has been paid twice, once in April and again at the end of May, 2009. The TFG is paying his hospital bills.

Musa

¶6. Musa is a quiet 20 year-old Hawiye/Abgal from Middle Shabelle. He came to Mogadishu to enlist in the TFG's national army in late 2008 from his rural home where he and his family farmed and raised livestock. He went to a recruiting office in the Medina area of Mogadishu to sign up "to defend the people," he said. A short time

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later he reported with other recruits to the airport, and was flown to Uganda, one of the more than 500 TFG soldiers to undergo basic training there. Musa said his training was useful, and that he was well-treated at the camp. After training, he and his unit returned to Mogadishu, and stayed for a time at the AMISOM camp at Mogadishu airport. Soon they were moved to housing in three buildings around Villa Somalia, including the abandoned Chinese Embassy. Ugandan AMISOM troops provided their food, he said. His salary was \$100 plus \$30 for food. He had been paid once, at the end of May, directly by Minister of Defense Ghandi, with a crisp, new \$100 bill, he said. Due to a lack of change, every 10 soldiers were given \$300 to divide up for food. They changed the dollars into Somali shillings nearby. Musa sent his salary to his relatives.

¶7. Musa described how he was wounded. He said that during mid-June fighting against al-Shabaab and its allies he and his unit-mates were told in the middle of the night to leave their defensive barricades in the neighborhoods around Villa Somalia. Musa said his unit's orders were passed by cell phone and word of mouth; his unit lacked proper command. They'd been told to expect an attack, and were sent forward on foot through neighborhoods in the lower Wardhigley district. In Wardhigley they engaged encroaching al-Shabaab fighters and drove them back. By mid-morning his unit had almost reached Industrial Road in the Wardhigley district, and al-Shabaab was retreating, he said. His company had two RPG-7 launchers, but one malfunctioned early in the day. By 11:00 a.m. Musa said most TFG units, including his company, had run out of RPG ammunition. As was typical he said, Al-Shabaab had not, and the TFG began to retreat under superior fire. (Note: AMISOM strictly rations supplies of ammunition to TFG soldiers to try to prevent them from selling it. End Note.)

¶8. As he was fighting along Sodonka Road in Wardhigley, one member of his four man team became wounded. His two remaining comrades carried the wounded soldier a short distance away to safety. Musa said that, as he held his position alone, three al-Shabaab apparently crossed Sodonka Road unseen and entered a building behind him. One shot Musa in the leg. As he lay motionless, one of the fighters crept up to take his weapon. Not knowing two more fighters remained hidden, Musa shot and killed the approaching fighter. The remaining two Shabaab then opened fire on Musa, hitting him in the wrist and other leg. Hearing the gunfire, Musa's colleagues returned and drove off the remaining fighters. As is everyone's practice, they took the Shabaab's weapon and ammunition, but did not

search the deceased fighters' pockets, he said.

¶9. We asked Musa what he knew of his enemy. He said they were "terrible people" and they have only "evil" intentions for Somalia. Musa and the other wounded soldiers said Shabaab fighters are typically very young, usually younger than 20 years old. They are shown extremist videos and quickly believe what they are taught by their leaders. Rumors have it that al-Shabaab fighters murder their prisoners and mutilate their bodies. He told us of a captured al-Shabaab fighter, whose age Musa estimated to be 14 years. They asked the fighter how he expected to be treated, given Shabaab's reputation for ruthlessness. The boy replied defiantly that if set free, he would return to kill them, and if killed, he would enter paradise.

¶10. We asked what TFG soldiers needed in order to prevail over al-Shabaab. Musa and the other soldiers agreed they needed (in order of mention) proper leadership, adequate weapons and ammunition, acceptable food, and regular pay.

¶11. Comment: We were struck that, sharing the same hospital room with the amiability of comrades-in-arms, was a former ICU militiaman who joined to fight against the Ethiopian-backed government, and a TFG soldier who joined to fight for the government. Yet another injured TFG soldier we met was trained by Ethiopia. All had become friends, united by wounds received in the fight against al-Shabaab. We also note that good leadership topped the young soldiers' list of needs to defeat al-Shabaab. End Comment.

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